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SUBJECT: SHINUI SCIENCE MINISTER MAKES CASE AGAINST  
UNILATERAL GAZA WITHDRAWAL

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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11. (C) In a March 10 meeting with the Ambassador, Minister of Science and Technology (and Shinui MK) Eliezer Sandberg outlined his opposition to unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, adding his view that the Israeli public is moving in that direction as well. Sandberg cited three reasons for his opposition: history shows that the withdrawal from Lebanon encouraged greater violence and the present intifada; Israeli military presence within Gaza is needed for the time being; and aversion toward appearing to reward Arafat. Sandberg could support withdrawal from Gaza if it were coupled with measures designed to send the message to the Palestinians that it did not come without a price (e.g. shifting of settler presence to the West Bank), and provide the incentive for negotiations. He would support a unilateral move only if the IDF were to signal that continued presence in Gaza is not militarily tenable. Sandberg indicated that he and other Shinui members would vote their conscience and not be bound by party loyalty if this issue were brought to a Cabinet vote. Turning to science issues, Sandberg expressed frustration at the limited budget and clout of his ministry. He would like to have closer relations with the USG -- particularly on space issues -- and stated that he has pressed PM Sharon to embrace nanotechnology in the same manner that Israel created the National Water Carrier and Dimona nuclear facilities. Sandberg has been in the Knesset since 1992, is Chair of the Shinui Knesset faction and while one of the party's more right-wing members, is not regarded as an influential figure. End Summary.

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Israeli Public Moving Toward Settler Position  
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12. (C) Sandberg, one of 5 Shinui members in the Cabinet, opened the meeting by asserting that public sympathy in Israel is shifting toward the settler position on Gaza withdrawal. If the Palestinians would only attack soldiers protecting the settlements, then public opinion might well build for unilateral measures. But as long as attacks continue within Israel, the public sees the value of continued Israeli military presence in Gaza. Sandberg outlined three key reasons why he opposes unilateral withdrawal. First, the Lebanon experience demonstrates that unilateral withdrawal inspires the Palestinians toward more violence. It gives them hope that through terror they can force Israel to run. Second, Sandberg believes that Israeli military presence is still required in Gaza for the time being. The ability to rapidly segregate the Strip into three isolated boxes and to control crossroads offers valuable security. Finally, this move will be viewed as rewarding Arafat -- "the partner who betrayed us" -- and continuing the failed Oslo process.

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Palestinians Have to Pay a Price  
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13. (C) The Palestinians must be convinced that there is no alternative to negotiation, Sandberg continued, and a price must be paid for Gaza withdrawal. To do otherwise would feed the view that time is on the Palestinian side and that the Israeli presence in the region is reversible. He suggests that withdrawal from Gaza be coupled with a settler move to at least one West Bank area to create facts on the ground that will change only through further negotiation. This would accelerate, not retard, efforts to return to negotiations. Sandberg would apply the same approach to the separation barrier, pushing deeper into the West Bank with the understanding that it could be moved back through negotiation. Planting the barrier close to the 1967 border would be the worst case scenario since it would remove any incentive for the Palestinians to come to the table. In the end, Sandberg opined, we will evacuate many areas in the territories, but "we must be tough now in order to be soft later." How would Sandberg react, the Ambassador queried, if the USG were to offer the GOI "something attractive" in terms

of coupling the withdrawal with additional measures in the West Bank. Such a move would be persuasive, the Minister replied, since it would provide the Palestinians with an incentive to negotiate.

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Shinui Unity in the Cabinet  
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14. (C) With respect to whether Shinui will vote as a bloc should the withdrawal issue come to a Cabinet vote, Sandberg noted that "it depends on who you ask." He made clear that he would not feel bound to follow the party line -- suggesting that he is contemplating leaving public office anyway at the end of his term -- and indicated that up to four Shinui Cabinet members may be prepared to buck the party position on unilateral withdrawal. He will vote his conscience, Sandberg continued, and the only set of circumstances that could cause him to change his view on a unilateral withdrawal would be if the IDF were to declare that continuing to stay in Gaza and providing security for the settlements was not militarily tenable.

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Science Ministry Struggling  
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15. (SBU) Turning to his role as Minister of Science and Technology, Sandberg bemoaned the small budget and clout of his ministry. The three principal foci of his ministry are management of 10 R&D centers, support for the Israeli space program, and efforts to coordinate GOI positions in key areas of applied research. Sandberg expressed interest in closer relations with NASA -- particularly in the fields of science education and efforts to send a second Israeli astronaut on the shuttle. He also recounted efforts to expand Israeli scientific presence in the global scene, including the recent S&T agreement signed with India and discussions with Ethiopian officials concerning exchanges in the areas of research, education and equipment. He indicated that he intends to participate in the next Earth Observation Summit ministerial in Japan. The Ambassador noted that Israeli observers have not been regularly attending meetings of the OECD Committee on Science and Technology Policy, a logical place for Israeli input on issues of regional and global concern. Sandberg stated that he had only recently become aware of this problem, and had asked the Director General of the Ministry to resolve the matter. He reassured the Ambassador that Israel was interested in remaining engaged on the committee.

16. (SBU) In Sandberg's view, the GOI should engage in a major policy and research initiative in the area of nanotechnology. He suggested to the Prime Minister that an effort along the lines of construction of the National Water Carrier or the Dimona nuclear facility be dedicated toward this field. Although the GOI could never match the resources that the USG and European countries have dedicated, he believed that Israeli scientists could establish their niche and gain access to international funding. The Ambassador suggested that the U.S.-Israel binational science organizations (Binational Industrial Research and Development (BIRD), Binational Agricultural Research and Development (BARD), Binational Science Foundation (BSF)) might provide a convenient mechanism for Israeli scientists to engage U.S. counterparts in state-of-the-art research in the field, potentially leading to access to additional USG or international funding.

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Bio Note  
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17. (C) Sandberg, a Knesset member since 1992 and Minister of Science and Technology since 2003, is one of the Shinui party's right-wing members. He is not regarded as one of the more vocal or influential members of the party. Sandberg began his political career in the hard-line Tsomet party, where he served as legal advisor and secretary general. While in Tsomet, he was one of the architects of the electoral reform proposals adopted in 1992. He left the party in the late 1990's during a round of "party musical chairs," when 14 ministers who were not returned to the Knesset on their own party lists joined other parties, where they were promised a high enough slot on the list to be elected. Sandberg ultimately joined Shinui, and now serves as chair of the Shinui Knesset faction. He has served on the economics, constitution, law and justice, and science and technology committees. From February 1998-June 1999 he was Deputy Minister of Education, Culture and Sport. Sandberg has long fought draft deferrals for yeshiva students and the stringent Shabbat regulations, and pushed for Israeli membership in the European Union. Sandberg graduated with a degree in law from Tel Aviv University. He delayed his entry into the military by participating in the academic reserve, eventually serving as a lieutenant in the Army Prosecutor's

Office. He is married, has three children and speaks Hebrew and English.

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